Language is one of the cornerstones of national identity, cultural unity, and community cohesion. Old languages with historic roots, and languages spoken by threatened minorities, are nurtured and fostered by their speakers. But language also can be a weapon in cultural conflict and in political strife. In the United States, the growth of the Spanish-speaking population has led to demands for the use of Spanish in public affairs; this movement, in turn, has spawned national countermovements called “English Only” and “English First.” In Quebec, a campaign for political independence from Canada was accompanied by the official demotion of English in favor of Quebec’s distinctive version of French. Language is a powerful component of local nationalisms in many areas. The issue now is: Why do regimes in multilingual countries seek to promote a single national language? What are the consequences of such initiatives?
From the field notes

“Efforts to maintain and nurture indigenous and precolonial languages continue to multiply and can often be seen in the cultural landscape. Here in Ireland, official signs give the names of towns and other geographic features in Gaelic as well as English. I started to take notes, and soon I had a list not only of Gaelic equivalents of English place names, but also of geographic features such as, on this sign on the outskirts of Kilkenny, ‘city center’.”
People tend to feel passionately about their language, especially when they sense that it is threatened. Language is at the heart of culture, and culture is the glue of society; without language, culture could not be transmitted from one generation to the next.

Such passion is not the exclusive preserve of small groups whose languages are threatened by extinction (of which there are many). It is also exhibited by cultures whose languages are spoken by the tens, even hundreds, of millions. Many French citizens, for example, are fiercely, even aggressively protective of their language. A former French president, Georges Pompidou, once stated that “It is through our language that we exist in the world other than as just another country.”

More than 25 years ago these words were given the force of law: in 1975 the French government banned the use of foreign words in advertisements, television and radio broadcasts, and official documents unless no French equivalent could be found. In 1992, France amended its constitution to make French the official language of the Republic. In 1994 still another law was passed to stop the use of foreign (mainly English) words in France, with a hefty fine imposed for violators. The government, said the French, would have to get used to saying something other than le meeting, le corner, le drugstore, and le hamburger.

Such legislation is unlikely to stop the “pollution” of French. In our modern, interconnected world, where innovations diffuse rapidly, words will be borrowed and languages will change. But French is in no danger of disappearing. Many communities that perceive a real threat to their culture’s survival will protect it even more forcefully.

Preliterate societies (peoples who speak their language but do not write it) are at a disadvantage. Although they can transmit their culture from one generation to the next, they do not have a written literature that can serve as a foundation for cultural preservation. Like endangered species, there are languages that are on the verge of extinction, and others that are threatened. The language mosaic of the world is constantly changing.

Linguists estimate that between 5000 and 6000 languages are in use in the world today, some spoken by many millions of people, others by a few hundred. As we will note in Chapter 9, there are many unanswered questions about the origins and diffusion of all these languages; clearly, however, the same migrations that led to spatial isolation among early human communities also led to linguistic differences. Modern research is reconstructing the paths of linguistic diversification and throwing new light on ancient migrations.
DEFINING LANGUAGE

The term language has been defined in numerous ways. Webster’s Dictionary defines it as “a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, gestures, marks, or especially articulate vocal sounds.” Communication of sound (vocalization) is the crucial part of this definition. Such communication is symbolic; that is, in each language the meanings of sounds and combination of sounds must be learned.

The definition is correct in stating that other means of communication also constitute “language.” Nonhuman primates such as chimpanzees can also communicate through signs, such as combinations of gestures and sounds that alert the group to the presence of a predator or the availability of food. Elephants and dolphins, too, use sounds to communicate. But only humans have developed complex vocal communication systems that change over time and space. How these systems first emerged remains an unanswered question. We do know that the vocal systems of nonhuman primates are so basic and static that they are unlikely to have been forerunners of human language.

This means that human languages, even those spoken in preliterate societies, are fundamentally different from those of nonhuman primates. The Khoisan-speaking peoples of southwestern Africa may not have a word for helicopter, but they have the symbols that they can use to describe this piece of unfamiliar technology. The potential vocabulary of any language is infinite, whether it is spoken by large-scale industrialized societies or by nonindustrial peoples like the San or the Yanomami of the Amazonian rainforest.

Languages are not static but change continuously. A vital culture requires a flexible language. If you read a few pages from one of Shakespeare’s plays, you will realize how much English has changed over several centuries. Today we can see changes in American English; the computer revolution, for example, has greatly expanded the vocabulary of commonly used words. In this chapter we examine fundamental geographic aspects of the world’s language mosaic—their distribution and spread. This will prepare us for an introduction to the fascinating study of language origins and diffusion, the subject of Chapter 9. In Chapter 10 we will look at some topics of special interest, including the language of place names.

Who decides what the standard language will be? Not surprisingly, the answer has to do with influence and power. In France, the French spoken in and around Paris was made the official, standard language during the sixteenth century. In China, standard Chinese is the Northern Mandarin Chinese heard in and around the capital, Beijing. Although this is China’s official standard language, the linguistic term “Chinese” actually incorporates many variants. This distinction between the standard language and other versions of it is not unique to China; it is found in all but the smallest societies. The Italian of Sicily is very different from that spoken north of Venice, and both tongues differ from the standard Italian of Latium, the region around Rome.

Dialects

As we will see, the distinction between a language and a dialect is not always clear, but dialects can generally be thought of as regional variants of a standard language. Differences in vocabulary, syntax (the way words are put together to form phrases), pronunciation, cadence (the rhythm of speech), and even the pace of speech all mark a speaker’s dialect. Even if the written form of a statement adheres to the standard language, an accent can reveal the regional home of a person who reads the statement aloud. The words “horse” and “oil” are written the same way in New England and in the South, but to the Southerner, the New Englander may be saying “hahse,” while to the New Englander the Southerner seems to be saying “all.”

More often, however, dialects are marked by actual differences in vocabulary. A single word or group of words can reveal the source area of the dialect used. Linguistic geographers map the areal extent of particular words, marking their limits as isoglosses (Fig. 8-1). An example is the word “flock,” which has receded in favor of “herd” but some outliers of “herd” remain.

Isoglosses move over time. In this hypothetical case, the use of “herd” has receded in favor of “flock,” but some outliers of “herd” remain.
isogloss is a geographic boundary within which a particular linguistic feature occurs, but such a boundary is rarely a simple line. Usually there are outlying areas of usage, as in Figure 8-1. This may signify either that use of the dialect has expanded or that it has contracted, leaving the outliers as dwindling remnants. A series of large-scale maps over time will tell the story of that dialect’s advance or retreat.

**CLASSIFICATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF LANGUAGES**

In the context of cultural geography, we are interested in how languages are distributed throughout the world, what processes created this distribution, and how the present pattern is changing.

Before we view maps of language distribution, however, let us briefly consider the problem of language classification. This obviously relates to the definition of language. What is a language and what is a dialect? That issue is a complex one. Some scholars have classified Quebecois French as a language, whereas others insist that it is a dialect of European French. In regions of Africa where Bantu languages are spoken, many of those languages are closely related and share major portions of their vocabulary.

What is clear is that the distinction between a language and a dialect is not based on an objective measure of mutual intelligibility; if it were, Chinese would not be
considered one language, whereas Norwegian and Danish might be. Instead, we must recognize that what we consider a language is a function of society’s view of what constitutes a cultural community—a matter that in turn is influenced by historical developments in the political arena. The ability of the Chinese political elite to build and sustain a state encompassing speakers of different, albeit closely related, Sino-Tibetan tongues helps explain why we think of Chinese as one language. By contrast, the disintegration of the Danish and Swedish empires is partly responsible for our tendency to recognize several distinct languages in Scandinavia. As such, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that a language is a dialect with an army behind it.

Given the complexities of distinguishing languages from dialects, the actual number of languages in use remains a matter of considerable debate. The most conservative calculation, which would recognize the maximum number of dialects, puts the number at about 3000. Most linguistic geographers today would recognize between 5000 and 6000 languages, including more than 600 in India and over 1000 in Africa alone.

In classifying languages we use terms that are also employed in biology, and for the same reasons: some languages are related and others are not. Languages that are grouped in language families are thought to have a shared, but fairly distant, origin; in a language subfamily, their commonality is more definite. Subfamilies are divided into language groups, which consist of sets of individual languages.

Figure 8-2 shows the distribution of 20 major language families. On this map, only the Indo-European language family is broken down into subfamilies (greater detail for Europe is shown in Figure 8-3). Spatially, the
Indo-European languages are the most widely dispersed language family. As Figure 8-2 indicates, the Indo-European language family dominates not only in Europe but also in significant parts of Asia (including Russia and India), North and South America, Australia, and portions of Southern Africa. **Indo-European languages** are spoken by about half the world's peoples, and English is the most widely used Indo-European language.

Geolinguists theorize that a lost language (or set of languages) they call Proto-Indo-European existed somewhere in the vicinity of the Black Sea or east-central Europe (see the discussion in the next chapter) and that the present languages of the Indo-European family evolved from it. As Indo-European speakers dispersed, vocabularies grew and linguistic differentiation took place. Latin arose during this early period and was disseminated over much of Europe during the rise of the Roman Empire. Later, Latin died out and was supplanted by Italian, French, and the other Romance languages.

As Figure 8-2 indicates, the Indo-European language family includes not only the major languages of Europe and the former Soviet Union but also those of northern India and Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. This reflects the probable route of ancient migration from the west to South Asia. More modern migrations carried Indo-European languages (principally English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French) to the Americas, Australia, and Africa.

### THE MAJOR WORLD LANGUAGES

Although more of the world's peoples speak Indo-European languages than languages in any other family, Chinese is the single most important language in terms of number of speakers (Table 8-1), with English ranking second. The numbers in Table 8-1 should be viewed as approximations. English, for example, is not only spoken by 280 million North Americans, 60 million Britons and Irish, more than 20 million Australians and New Zealanders, and millions more in countries with smaller populations; it is also used as a second language by hundreds of millions of people in India, Africa, and elsewhere. French is the first language of 77 million people (some sources report as many as 100 million), but it is also widely used as a second language. Note also that some of the numbers in Table 8-1 are based on population data that are not reliable. The regional languages of India (Indo-European as well as Dravidian) are among the most used, but exact data on the number of speakers are not available.

Table 8-1 does not list any languages spoken south of the Sahara as major world languages. One reason can be seen in Figure 8-2: the African language map is highly fragmented. Sub-Saharan Africa still has a relatively small population (647 million people in 2002), but more than 1000 languages are spoken there. These languages are grouped into four families (3, 4, 5, and 6 in Figure 8-2). In terms of number of speakers, Hausa is estimated to be the most important Subsaharan African language, with perhaps as many as 50 million speakers. Hundreds of African languages have fewer than 1 million speakers.

Figure 8-2 also shows other language families that are spoken by dwindling, often marginally located or isolated groups. Austro-Asiatic languages (11), spoken in interior locales of eastern India and in Cambodia (Khmer) and Laos, are thought to be survivors of ancient languages spoken before modern invasions and cultural diffusion took place. Some scholars place Vietnamese in this family, but others do not. The Papuan and indigenous Australian languages (13), though numerous and quite diverse, are spoken by fewer than 10 million people. The languages of Native Americans (14) remain strong only in areas of Middle America, the high Andes, and northern Canada. Languages of the Eskimo-Aleut family (20) survive on the Arctic margins of Greenland, North America, and eastern Asia.

If we look carefully at the map of world languages, some interesting questions arise. Consider, for example, the island of Madagascar off the East African coast. The primary languages spoken on Madagascar belong not to an African language family but to the Malay-Polynesian family, the languages of Indonesia and its neighbors. How did this happen on an island so close to Africa? Actually, the map reveals a piece of ancient history that is.

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<th>Table 8-1 The Major World Language Families</th>
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<td><strong>Language Family</strong></td>
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<td>Malay-Polynesian</td>
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Long ago, seafarers from the islands of Southeast Asia crossed the Indian Ocean. They may have reached the East African coast first and then sailed on to Madagascar, where they settled. Africans had not yet sailed across the strait, so there was no threat to the Indonesian-Malayan settlements. Africans had not yet sailed across the strait, so there was no threat to the Indonesian-Malayan settlements. The settlements grew and prospered, and large states evolved. Later, Africans began to come to Madagascar, but by that time the cultural landscape had been established. If you compare the names of Madagascar’s places to those across the water in Africa, you can see evidence of a fascinating piece of geographic history.

The Languages of Europe

The language map of Europe (Fig. 8.3) shows that the Indo-European language family prevails in this region, with pockets of the Uralic family occurring in Hungary (the Ugric subfamily) and in Finland and adjacent areas (the Finnic subfamily), and a major Altaic language—Turkish—dominating Turkey west of the Sea of Marmara. Indo-European tongues were brought into Europe by Celtic peoples who spread across the continent during the first millennium B.C. The Celtic speech still survives at the western edges of Europe, but in most places Celtic tongues fell victim to subsequent migrations and empire building. These historical developments led to the creation of a European linguistic pattern characterized by three major subgroups: Romance, Germanic, and Slavic.

The Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, and Portuguese) lie in areas once dominated by the Roman Empire where the dominant form of speech was not subsequently overwhelmed by immigrants. The Germanic languages (English, German, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish) reflect the expansion of peoples out of northern Europe to the west and south. Some Germanic peoples spread into areas dominated by Rome, and at the northern and northeastern edges of the Roman Empire their tongues gained ascendancy. Other Germanic peoples spread into areas that had never been a part of an ancient empire (e.g., present-day Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and the northern part of the Netherlands). The Germanic character of English bears the imprint of a further migration—that of the Normans into England in 1066, bringing a Romance tongue to the British Isles. The essential Germanic character of English remained, but many new words were added that are Romance in origin. The Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Ukrainian, Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, and Bulgarian) came as Slavic people migrated from a base in present-day Ukraine close to 2000 years ago. Slavic tongues came to dominate much of eastern Europe over the succeeding centuries. They too overwhelmed Latin-based tongues along much of the eastern part of the old Roman Empire—with the notable exception of an area on the western shores of the Black Sea, where a Latin-based tongue either survived the Slavic invasion or was reintroduced by migrants. That tongue is the ancestor of the modern-day Romance language: Romanian.

A comparison of Europe’s linguistic and political maps shows a high correlation between the languages spoken and the political organization of space. The Romance languages, of Romanic-Latin origin, dominate in five countries, including Romania. The eastern boundaries of Germany coincide almost exactly with the transition from Germanic to Slavic tongues. Even at the level of individual languages, boundaries can be seen on the political map between French and Spanish, between Norwegian and Swedish, and between Bulgarian and Greek.

From the field notes

“Approaching the orthodox Jewish neighborhood for Meah Shearim in Jerusalem, I was drawn to a large sign specifying guidelines for how one should dress when entering the neighborhood. The call for covered arms and skirts below the knee was interesting, but so was the language in which the call was made. Jerusalem is a cosmopolitan city, with people from all corners of the earth. But when the local community seeks to communicate with those from the outside, they resort to one (and only one) language: English.”
Although Figure 8-3 shows a significant correlation between political and linguistic boundaries, there are some important exceptions. The French linguistic region extends into Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy, but in France itself it coexists with a Celtic tongue in the Bretagne (Brittany) Peninsula. The Celtic languages survive not only in Brittany (Breton) but also in Wales (Welsh), western Ireland (Irish Gaelic), and Scotland (Scots Gaelic), where they constitute remnants of an early period of European history before modern languages displaced them toward the realm’s westernmost fringes. The use of Romanian extends well into Moldavia, signifying a past loss of national territory. Greek and Albanian are also Indo-European languages, and their regional distribution corresponds significantly (though not exactly) with national territories. Figure 8-3 underscores the complex cultural pattern of Eastern Europe: there are German speakers in Hungary, Hungarian speakers in Slovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia; Romanian speakers in Greece and Moldavia; Turkish speakers in Bulgaria; and Albanian speakers in Serbia.

Although the overwhelming majority of Europeans and Russians speak Indo-European languages, the Uralic and Altaic language families are also represented in this realm. Finnish, Estonian, and Hungarian are major languages of the Uralic family, which, as Figure 8-2 shows, extends across Eurasia to the Pacific coast. The Altaic family to which Turkish belongs is equally widespread and includes Turkish, Kazakh, Uigur, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek, among other languages. Not all students of linguistic geography view the Uralic and Altaic languages as distinct language families, and indeed there are reasons to group them together. It is believed that they both spread into Europe between 7000 and 10,000 years ago and later were overtaken in most places by the Indo-European languages. Their source area may have been a longitudinal zone along the Ural Mountains from which migrations occurred both westward into Europe and eastward into Asia. Whatever their origins, Uralic languages survive as the national languages of Finland and Hungary, and an Altaic language is the national language of Turkey.

The Languages of India

The mosaic of languages in India (Fig. 8-4) includes four language families, but only two of these—the

![Figure 8-4 Languages of India](image-url)
Indo-European family and the Dravidian family—have significant numbers of speakers among India’s nearly 1 billion inhabitants. In the Karakoram Mountains of Jammu and Kashmir (the far northwest) there are small numbers of Tibetan speakers, and along the border with Myanmar (Burma) in the east lies a cluster of Naga (Burmese) speakers. Also in the east are small groups of Austro-Asiatic speakers. Otherwise, the people of India speak about 15 major languages, all but 4 of them Indo-European, and more than 1600 lesser languages, some of which are spoken by only a few thousand persons.

As Figure 8-4 indicates, the four Dravidian languages are all spoken in a compact region in the south of the Indian Peninsula. The map suggests that these languages and the cultures they represent were “pushed” southward by the advancing Indo-European speakers. The Dravidian languages are older, although their origins are unclear. Some scholars believe that Dravidian emerged in India. Others suggest that Dravidian speakers arrived thousands of years ago from Central Asia and that Dravidian is related to Ural-Altaic languages. Still others link the Dravidians with the ancient Indian civilization that arose in what is today Pakistan. Indeed, there is a cluster of about 350,000 speakers of a form of Dravidian in north-central Pakistan. Today the largest Dravidian language, with about 69 million speakers, is Telugu, the language of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Tamil, with its rich literature, is spoken by approximately 66 million persons in Tamil Nadu. Kannada (also called Kanarese), the language of Karnataka, has approximately 5 million speakers, about the same number as Malayalam, which is spoken in the state of Kerala.

The close relationship between regional languages and political divisions in southern India also prevails in the north. Indeed, a comparison of Figure 8-4 with an atlas map of India’s federal system underscores the important role of languages in the development of this spatial structure. Hindi, the principal Indo-European language with approximately 66 million speakers, extends across several north-central Indian States. But east as well as west of India’s Hindi-speaking core lie States where other languages prevail: Orosa (Oriya), Bihar (Bihari), West Bengal (Bengali), Punjab (Punjabi), Rajasthan (Rajasthani), Gujarat (Gujarati), and Maharashtra (Marathi). In the northeast the linguistic map is especially complex, as is reflected in the existence of seven comparatively small states.

In addition to more than a dozen major languages, India has hundreds of lesser languages, both Indo-European and Dravidian, that cannot be shown on a map on the scale of Figure 8-4. Nevertheless, for such a large population the Indian language mosaic is not as intensely fragmented as Africa’s. Instead, like that of Europe, it is dominated by several major regional languages with more speakers than many national tongues.

The Languages of Africa

As noted earlier, more than 1000 languages are spoken in Subsaharan Africa, and linguists have been working to record many of these; most are unwritten. The resulting data offer significant insights into Africa’s cultural past.

The languages of Africa (Fig. 8-5) are grouped into four families, the largest of which is the Niger-Congo family, which extends from West Africa all the way to the south. This family can be subdivided into five subfamilies. One of these, the Bantu subfamily, encompasses the languages spoken by most of the people near the equator and south of it. The languages spoken in West Africa are of the Atlantic, Voltaic, Guinea, and Haua subfamilies. The oldest languages of Subsaharan Africa are the Khoisan languages, which include a “click” sound. Among these is the language of the San, spoken by only a few thousand people in southwestern Africa. Perhaps the Khoisan languages were once the main languages of much of Africa, but they have been reduced to comparative insignificance by the Bantu invasion, just as the Celtic languages were in Europe.

How can languages help us reconstruct the cultural development of Africa? Consider what has happened in Europe, where the subfamily of Romance languages has differentiated into French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Even within these individual languages we see evidence of differentiation—for example, between forms of Italian spoken in different parts of Italy or between Northern and Southern French and Walloon (the traditional form of French spoken in southern Belgium). Such differentiation develops over time, and it is reasonable to assume that the more time that elapses, the greater the individuality of each language will be. Therefore, if the peoples of a large region speak languages that are somewhat different but still closely related, it is reasonable to conclude that they have migrated into that region relatively recently. On the other hand, languages that clearly have common roots and yet are very different must have undergone modification over a lengthy period.

Among the languages of the Niger-Congo family, those of the Bantu subfamily are much more closely related than those of other subfamilies. We can therefore deduce that the Bantu peoples and cultures of Central and Southern Africa are of more recent origin than those of West Africa. This is reflected in African names. The word “Bantu” should actually be written BaNtu (people), with the Ba being a prefix. Sometimes the prefix is retained in common usage, sometimes not. The Watusi, for example, are now usually called Tutsi. The people of

Part Three  The Global Linguistic Mosaic
The BaGanda or Ganda. The Zulu of South Africa are actually the AmaZulu. Stories about Zimbabwe often mention the MaShona or Shona. Remember Basutoland, now called Lesotho? It was originally named after the Sotho, and BaSotholand became Basutoland.

Ba, Ma, Wa, and Ama are not very far removed linguistically, and they reveal close associations between languages and peoples spread across Africa from Uganda to Kwazulu-Natal.

It is not just a matter of prefixes, of course. Bantu languages reflect their close relationships in vocabulary and in numerous other respects. Geolinguists have traced the changes that occur over space in a single word and have found that thousands of miles away a word is often quite close to its original form. Consider the familiar Swahili greeting, jambo, used in coastal East Africa. In the eastern Transvaal of South Africa and Swaziland, people will recognize jabo.

The situation in West Africa is quite different. Some of the languages there are closely associated, but the major languages of the West African subfamilies are much more discrete. Of course, there are other kinds of evidence supporting the conclusion that the peoples of Bantu Africa have a shorter history in that area than those of West Africa, but the primary evidence is linguistic.

**Chinese: One Language or Many?**

The map of China’s ethnolinguistic areas (Fig. 8-6) should be compared to the map of world population distribution (Fig. 4-1). That comparison will reveal that the great majority of China’s people speak Mandarin, either Northern or Southern. Chinese is one of the world’s oldest languages and is spoken by the greatest contiguous population cluster on the Earth.
As the map shows, a number of Chinese dialects prevail in large areas of the country, notably in the south. Most of these dialects are mutually unintelligible, and some scholars therefore argue that Chinese is not one but several languages, among which Mandarin dominates with about 874 million speakers. Wu Chinese ranks next with over 75 million, and Yue (Cantonese) is third with about 71 million.

In mid-1997, when the government of China took over control of Hong Kong from the British, Beijing’s leaders all made their speeches in Northern Mandarin, and the Cantonese familiar to the great majority of Hong Kong’s population was never heard. Thus China’s rulers used language to underscore the nature of the new authority to which the local people would now be subject.

During the twentieth century several efforts were made to create a truly national language in China. The latest of these efforts is the so-called pinyin system, a phonetic-spelling system based on the pronunciation of Chinese characters in Northern Mandarin, China’s standard language. But China’s population contains many minorities, as Figure 8-6 reminds us, and as a result linguistic integration may never be achieved.

One of the most interesting and challenging dimensions of the geography of language is the reconstruction of the routes of diffusion of peoples and their languages. While linguists attempt to establish the family tree of languages, geographers focus on the spatial implications of this effort: the routes of migration and linguistic diffusion. We turn next to this complicated topic, about which new information is constantly emerging.
1. Why is the language spoken by more people in this world than any other not the language of international trade and communication? What factors put another language in this position? Can you foresee a twenty-first-century scenario that might alter the balance?

2. In 1997 several dozen “Francophone” countries convened in Hanoi, Vietnam, to discuss ways to promote the use of French and to (in the words of the conference report) “reverse the deterioration” of the language. In the social, economic, and political geography of the world today, why do French-speakers feel a threat to their language?

3. In terms of the geographic pattern (not the origins) of language, what do Subsaharan Africa and New Guinea have in common?